



Updated Guidance on Reporting COVID-19 Outbreaks and Clusters

Updated June 13, 2022

Background

NC DHHS continues to provide resources and expertise to assist the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As we transition into a new phase of the pandemic, it is necessary to respond to changing trends in disease transmission and meet the needs of the community and local health departments.

As a result of changing guidance related to case investigation and contact tracing, it is useful to re-evaluate reporting definitions for COVID-19 outbreaks and clusters to increase flexibility for local health departments to investigate, report, and implement control measures while accounting for differences in setting size, setting type, and transmission dynamics.

The following updated guidance shortens the time periods for reporting outbreaks and clusters and declaring them over, which will increase specificity in the context of shorter incubation periods, and increases the cluster size required for reporting, identifying events more likely to represent true clusters and increasing specificity in the context of community spread. The updated cluster definition also allows for reporting clusters in the absence of clear epidemiologic links between the cases, which will benefit local health department investigations during periods of widespread community transmission.

More specifically, the following changes were made to outbreak and cluster definitions:

- Shortened time period from 28 days to 14 days between the cases in a setting to report an outbreak or cluster
- Shortened time period from 28 days to 14 days since the last reported case in an outbreak or cluster to declare it over
- Additional options to identify clusters to account for situations where information related to epidemiological linkages between the cases is not available

Outbreak Guidance

Revised outbreak definitions: NC DPH recommends the following definition for reporting outbreaks of COVID-19 in congregate living settings.

Criteria to report an outbreak in a congregate living facility

- Two or more laboratory-confirmed cases of COVID-19 in residents or staff within 14 days in the same facility.

Criteria to declare an outbreak over

- 14 days since the date of specimen collection of the most recent outbreak-associated case in the facility



Local health departments should continue to report outbreaks in congregate living settings, which include:

- Long-term care facilities
- Correctional facilities
- Housing facilities for migrant workers (e.g., farmworkers)
- Shelters

Cluster Guidance

In settings that are not congregate living— including occupational, educational, community settings, and other cluster settings – it can be difficult to determine if a cluster of cases is occurring due to transmission within the setting or spread in the broader community. A different definition is needed in these settings to more accurately differentiate between community transmission and transmission within a specific setting for which specific control measures may be needed.

Revised cluster definitions: NC DPH recommends the following definition for reporting clusters of COVID-19 in non-congregate living settings.

Criteria to report a cluster in a non-congregate living setting

- A minimum of five laboratory-confirmed cases of COVID-19 within 14 days with evidence of epidemiologic linkage between cases OR
- 15 or more laboratory-confirmed cases of COVID-19 within 14 days associated with the same setting or facility in the absence of specific information about epidemiologic linkage*

*LHDs may choose to investigate and report clusters that do not meet these criteria at their discretion based on local factors not addressed in this document (e.g., in small settings where fewer than 15 cases represents a majority of the total in that setting or a setting with high-risk populations). NC DPH recommends a minimum of 5 cases associated with a setting before any cluster is reported.

Criteria to declare a cluster over: 14 days since the date of specimen collection of the most recent cluster-associated case in the setting or facility.

The definitions of non-congregate living settings are broad, but might include the following:

- Occupational settings
 - Food processing plants
 - Production facilities
 - Distribution facilities
 - Factories
 - Construction sites
 - Office buildings
- Educational settings
 - Childcare facilities
 - Schools
 - Colleges or universities



- Community settings
 - Religious gatherings
 - Treatment Centers
 - Independent Living/Retirement Centers
 - Camps
 - Other large gatherings or events
- Other clusters
 - Healthcare
 - Retail
 - Restaurants

Reporting

Local health departments should continue to report outbreaks and clusters that meet reporting criteria to NC DPH via the online reporting survey at <https://is.gd/COVIDOutbreaks>. The local health departments should report outbreaks and clusters within 24 hours of identification.

Data on outbreaks are available on the DHHS COVID-19 dashboard at <https://covid19.ncdhhs.gov/dashboard/outbreaks>

Questions about outbreak and cluster reporting guidance may be sent to outbreak-data@dhhs.nc.gov